



Inclusion strategies for students with emotional disabilities

by Karina Malik

As a special education teacher in a dual language program at a public school in Washington Heights, I've had the opportunity to work with a variety of students on different grade levels, each with a unique set of challenges. Although I learned a lot of strategies through professional development sessions and working with model teachers, there was always one area that, year after year, I continued to feel underprepared to take on as a special education teacher: the classification of "emotional disability," which was rarely spoken about in my teacher preparation program and throughout my teaching career. In fact, when I did hear about students with emotional disabilities, it was usually because other teachers were also struggling to understand them.

Through many years of experience, I've learned valuable lessons and strategies for working with students that have been labeled with emotional disabilities. I would like to share the inclusion strategies that have proven to be the most effective in my practice as a community school teacher:

Collaboration among co-teachers and related service providers

Being in an inclusive classroom requires dedicated collaboration between co-teachers. We cannot enter inclusive co-teaching classrooms with the mindset of a teacher who runs their classroom by themselves. Entering a co-teaching relationship requires both parties to invest time getting to know each other as humans.

Often, teachers are not given the space and time to build relationships with each other at the beginning of the year. I usually like to use the summer to schedule a few dates with my new co-teacher. During this time, we get to know each other and discuss our known areas of strength as teachers, as well as areas where we'd like to grow. We discuss our expectations of each other, our students, and our classroom. This generally helped us start on the same page, build repertoire and helped us understand our different teaching styles. Once the year began, we reviewed [Marilyn Friend's six co-teaching models](#). Being clear about our positions and roles in the classroom was integral to co-teaching because it allowed us to build predictable routines for students and adults.

In addition to collaboration between co-teachers, it's just as important to collaborate with service providers like speech, physical, and occupational therapists. All students benefit from the strategies used by therapists within the classroom. For example, when I taught first grade, writing was a particularly challenging subject because students are still learning how to develop their ideas on paper. The speech therapist who joined our classroom was instrumental in introducing graphic organizers, sentence starters, descriptive words, etc. In the same way, the occupational therapist pushed in to the classroom during a different writing period and helped us with different writing positions, pencil grip, sensory diets and movement breaks. Students who received services were not singled out, and all students benefited from the strategies.



Establish positive relationships with students and their families in culturally relevant ways

As many of us know, numerous studies highlight the positive impact of strong teacher and family relationships on students' academic achievement, social development, and overall well-being. The "Handbook of Research on Schools, Schooling, and Human Development" (Wentzel & Wentzel, 2014) suggests that positive teacher-student relationships contribute to students' motivation, engagement, and success in school. It also emphasizes the role of positive teacher-student relationships in fostering social and emotional development.

At my school, at the end of every school year, teachers and school staff visited the home or community of every new student entering our school. This gave us the opportunity to meet students and their families for the first time outside of a school setting and try to alleviate any anxiety they may have had about school. During these visits we asked questions to get to know children and families better. For example: What do you enjoy doing outside of school? How do you and your family like to spend time together? Lastly, we took a picture so we could purposefully include it in our school or classroom environment. This way something in the school is familiar to the student.

Home visits are also powerful because they create the opportunity for students to become teachers and for teachers to become students. In this way, school staff go into community settings as learners — trying to learn as much as possible about the family and the student before they enter the school setting.

Another way to build relationships with families is to invite them into your classroom. When you open the doors of the classroom to families, not only do they get the opportunity to see what children are working on in school, but students also get to witness the relationship between their teacher and family members. A few ways that families can be invited into the classroom is in the form of: publishing parties, sharing food and cultures, celebrating Black History or Hispanic Heritage month, birthday celebrations, etc. Regularly inviting families into the classroom allows for continuity in the relationship between family and teacher. It also allows the time and space for school staff to observe and gather information about students' emotional needs. Families are our students' first teachers. Creating an alliance with them is conducive to their academic and emotional well-being.

Creating a safe, supportive and equitable classroom environment

Building a classroom environment where students feel safe enough to take risks and be their authentic selves starts from the very first day we meet our students. It is a consistent work in progress that is very delicate because every single person in the classroom contributes to the environment — so as teachers, we need to be as proactive as possible. In a successful inclusive classroom, teachers consistently ask themselves: what modifications or accommodations can be implemented to help prevent and manage disruptive behaviors? We should be thinking about preventative strategies instead of being trapped in a loop where we are constantly responding to behaviors. Additionally, we should ask: How can we promote a positive and inclusive atmosphere where students feel comfortable and empathetic towards each other?

A few tools that I have used in my classroom to address the above questions include: emotion check-ins, classroom jobs, daily schedules, and equitable curricula and books.



An emotion check-in might look like a wall or bulletin board with an array of feelings that students can refer to in the morning and throughout the day. Talking about the range of emotions and acknowledging that it is OK to feel them allows students to become more emotionally intelligent. I have always found it helpful to create predictable, consistent classroom environments. Because change can be easier when we are aware of what is coming and when, a simple way to ease transitions between subjects is to showcase and review the schedule of the day. In the same way, it is important to allow space and time to discuss the schedule and answer any questions students may have.

Safe and supportive also means non-stimulating and predictable. In other words, when you walk into your classroom, are you visually bombarded with stimuli, or do you feel a sense of ease and calm because you're not crowded by materials and furniture? In a non-stimulating classroom, the only materials and resources that are within reach are the ones that we are currently using. This way, we are proactive in anticipating students' needs and plan our activities accordingly.

Lastly, we want classrooms, curricula and books that are equitable. As Rudine Sims Bishop wrote: Children need books to serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Mirrors in order to see themselves reflected, windows so they can look out into other realities and sliding glass doors to use their imagination to walk through. Allowing access to an array of experiences and realities is equitable practice.

Develop clear and consistent behavior management plans that involve all who work with the student.

How can we establish clear expectations and consequences while considering our students' emotional well-being? My co-teachers and I used this question as an anchor when developing any behavior management plan for students. Behavior plans can vary in complexity depending on age and need. They should always be strengths-based, providing positive feedback and reinforcement for desired behaviors instead of punitive. When we reinforce positive behaviors, we are clear and explicit about our expectations. When we give negative attention to undesired behaviors, we fail to be explicit about our expectations.

Students, their families and everyone who works with the student should be aware of the plan and its expectations and follow it accordingly. Communication is always key. In inclusion settings it is also important to establish a class system where the collective works towards a goal together. Intentionally teach students how to help peers in the classroom when it seems like they are struggling. All students are accountable to the classroom community as opposed to fueling individualism.

Implement social emotional and or therapeutic learning programs

One mistake I made often in my early years of teaching was waiting until a student was in crisis in order to address any social, emotional or relationship strategies. When a student is going through a crisis, they are not usually in the mental space to assimilate new information. But once I began to teach self- and social awareness daily, I began to see students use strategies when they needed them most.



Promoting self-care

Taking care of yourself has ripple effects that benefit those around you. As a role model in your classroom, when you practice self-care, you demonstrate the importance of taking care of oneself and setting boundaries. Through modeling, you can positively influence students' attitudes towards well-being and stress-management. Most importantly, when you promote your self-care, you reduce the risk of burnout and exhaustion. Teaching is an emotionally, physically and mentally draining, and demanding profession. When we as teachers take care of ourselves, we are better able to support our colleagues and students. Self-care to the overall health and sustainability of the teaching profession.

Teaching in inclusive settings requires a tremendous amount of collaboration. Teaching is not the kind of work that is done alone. It takes a community of teachers, school staff, families, and community organizations to raise the future generations of our world.

What kinds of strategies have you found the most successful in inclusive settings?

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